

YOU BELONG

At Mead High School

A MISSION FOR SAFETY AT A COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL



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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety,
Closing the Gap*

In this time of heightened school safety awareness,

many districts are renewing their efforts to develop school safety plans, analyze discipline data, and look at patterns and trends of student behavior. At Mead High School, the building leaders, staff, and student leaders believe helping all students develop a sense of belonging at the school is a great preventive measure to help ensure school safety.

Mead leaders and staff focus several efforts around increasing a sense of belonging. According to Evie Blad, it is difficult for individual teachers to address concerns of students who feel they might be judged negatively based on their identity. Educators try to use routines to help students feel welcome and safe at school, but have a difficult time if the school environment is not designed for someone from a different cultural or economic background. For that reason, Mead chose to address belonging as a school issue.

Hernandez and Seem say students who feel unsafe are reflecting the

social systemic gestalt of the school, including both the written and spoken policies and procedures, as well as the unspoken and unwritten norms regarding values, beliefs, and behaviors of those in the school. Since school safety is a systemic issue, it takes a systematic effort to address it. A sense of belonging by students helps with operational management and correlates with student achievement, and now there is a growing body of evidence indicating an association between school safety and a sense of belonging.

The AWSP Leadership Framework Criterion 2.2 focuses on ensuring

“Belonging was the driving force behind all of our administrative decisions.”

school safety, including the idea principals should focus on not only physical safety, but also social, emotional, and intellectual safety. In order to promote and celebrate emotional and intellectual diversity, students should be at the forefront of creating and welcoming students to diverse programs and activities in the school. The AWSP Leadership Framework says, “When activities are organized by peers, these programs can have a deep and lasting impact on daily actions and attitudes of the entire school.” Many school leaders have taken notice of the importance of a sense of belonging and the growing body of work that supports it. At Mead High School, we’ve made it our mission and vision. Together with student leaders and staff, we developed a mission and vision of the school to ensure ALL students BELONG at Mead High School.

Belonging was the driving force behind all of our administrative decisions. Whether planning for the collection of student data in the SIP, designing the focus and schedule for the LID days, organizing community events and partnerships, or seeking to improve systems of management and discipline, the administrative team used belonging as its guiding principal.

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Students from the Native American Club at the 2017 Mead Street Fair.



HOW DID THE INITIATIVE START?

Mead High School's decision to emphasize a sense of belonging began with a consideration of its changing student demographics. Mead High School is a comprehensive high school serving approximately 1,650 students. In the last decade, Mead experienced a demographic transformation. Once a far-north, rural, affluent community, it's now more suburban and socio-economically diverse. According to OSP's database, Mead's student body is now roughly 82% White/Caucasian with 20% on free/reduced lunch. That's a dramatic change from 1999, when the student body was 94.4% White/Caucasian and only 9.9% were on free/reduced lunch.

Although Mead's student body is more diverse and less monocultural in recent years, many of its student clubs, extracurricular activities, and systems of management and learning remained the same. In addition to the demographic data, several perception surveys completed by the staff and the students at the

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end of the 2016-2017 school year indicated a significant number of the staff and student body felt they “did not feel connected to the school's community”. In short, the incoming administrative team felt it was time to make a change and to commit to helping ALL of the students and staff feel they belong at Mead High School.

BELONGING TAKES ROOT

As the incoming administrative team began to brainstorm ways to promote and sustain belonging within the school and its community, it quickly realized the school needed to promote and celebrate clubs and activities. Students who feel they have a place to “fit in” within a school community where their cultural, social, and extracurricular interests are celebrated rather than judged,

not only feel more safe at school, but feel more connected to their peers and their teachers. The Student Club Council was created to start promoting the available clubs and activities. This council began monthly meetings in the fall and offered students a formal way not only to inform their classmates about their clubs, but also recruit and encourage participation in sponsored events and gatherings.

At the first Club Council meeting, only a few representatives attended. Traditional clubs like ASB, DECA, and Knowledge Bowl sent representatives largely because their advisors had strongly encouraged them to go and because, at the time, there were not many extracurricular clubs and organizations. Over time, we found ways to increase student involvement. But, as time went on, and as the Club Council was promoted in daily announcements and as students were continually encouraged to create clubs by teachers and advisors, and as word got out that Council meetings had free pizza from Little Ceasars, attendance grew. By the second semester, the meetings were packed with a plethora of students from diverse range of newly formed groups from Environmental Club to Fencing Club to Robotics Club, and Native American Club. In all, over a dozen new clubs were created in the first semester alone. Moreover, as the school year progressed, the hallways and classrooms stayed busy with a litany of students and advisors from ALL clubs and it became noticeable that more students, beyond just traditional student-athletes, wanted to stay at Mead even after the bell dismissed them at 2:30 p.m.



The Mead Fencing Club practices some moves.



Mead High School students at an assembly.

CELEBRATING BELONGING IN THE COMMUNITY

In order for belonging to truly take root in the Mead community, the admin team believed its future students and their families needed to be made aware of the many great ways they could also belong to the school's community. With this goal in mind, the team created the Mead High School Street Fair. This street fair was a celebratory event where staff, students, community members, and businesses came together for one night to see all that Mead had to offer. Mead High School's feeder elementary and middle school students and their parents received extra attention and marketing because the event was intended to get kids excited about coming to Mead one day.

At the fair, student services provided free food. The chamber orchestra, choir, and marching bands provided the music, and students got free books through a book drive. All of our school clubs and extracurricular organizations created activities to showcase Mead's diverse opportunities for involvement. One

group, the Mead Equestrian Club, provided free pony rides. Another group, the Native American Club, set up a tepee and performed a traditional dance from the Kalispel tribe that was supervised by tribal elders. The Mead Fencing club offered free lessons to willing participants and educated bystanders about the history of fencing. The foreign language clubs (Spanish, French, and German) offered free food and games in their language of interest. The Debate Club interacted with parents and students by giving them a quiz to help them determine which "type" of debater they would be.

In short, dozens of clubs and organizations were at the school and set-up a space where they could interact with students, community members, and parents to educate visitors about their programs. Moreover, community businesses and organizations, like Young Life, Anytime Fitness, Dance Teams, Fairwood Street Market, Fostering WA, Bite 2 Go, and Unified Sports, had information booths and spoke to attendees about how they partner with the school. Even a local dentist/



The Mead Street Fair includes music.

orthodontist office wanted to showcase their business since they work closely with many of the Mead families. A local restaurant, 1898, donated desserts so Mead's ProStart club could serve treats to attendees as a thank you to Mead patrons.

In short, the Street Fair provided the opportunity to celebrate belonging with the larger school community. At the fair, the school's diverse groups and partnerships were not only recognized, they were appreciated and celebrated. This event not only helped build a sense of pride in the school's effort to be inclusive, it helped future students and their families learn about the many interests and activities Mead High School offers. Traditional extracurricular clubs and activities, like sports and ASB, are

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well known in a school community, but the diversity of student clubs and community partnerships and resources used to help foster belonging and inclusion for every student often go unrecognized by the community at large. An event like the Street Fair provides the opportunity for those diverse resources to be recognized, appreciated, and promoted.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Researchers note students who are confident they belong and are valued by their teachers and peers are able to engage more fully in learning. Simply put, when students feel they belong in a school and are part of its community, they have fewer behavior problems, are more open to critical feedback, take greater advantage of learning opportunities, build important relationships, and generally have more positive attitudes about their classwork and teachers. In turn, they are more likely to persevere in the face of difficulty and do better in school.

Mead High School is one example of a school who noticed of the growing body of evidence surrounding belonging and started to promote and celebrate inclusivity. Successfully implementing belonging requires more than starting Club Councils and holding Street Fairs. If schools want to truly make belonging their mission and vision, it needs to be an integral part of every aspect of the school's SIP. Department leads, for instance, need to emphasize belonging as a part of their SMART goals. Master scheduling needs to be designed to ensure course offerings are appropriate for all students. Even daily announcements should reiterate belonging in its message. At Mead High School, the principal signs off announcements every day by saying "Remember, YOU belong at Mead High School!"

In short, as schools like Mead start to take notice of the important research



Students enjoying the Mead Street Fair.

and successful case studies about belonging, it is unclear if any specific or methodical prescription can be used to help bring belonging to a school. But what is clear is districts can no longer just analyze discipline data, develop intricate school safety plans, and practice safety drills. On the contrary, school leaders, teachers, and students need to focus on making schools a safe place for all students

to be by giving them a strong sense of belonging. No longer can schools depend on the traditional forms of developing student belonging through athletics and longstanding intellectual groups. Schools must now think creatively to provide social, emotional, and intellectual safety to a much more diverse group of young people and make them truly feel as if they belong. ■

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